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This working paper discusses the main aspects of the study of the Polish minority in contemporary Belarus. Particular attention is paid to issues of identity, authorities' stance towards Poles and various aspects of the functioning of Polish organizations in the country. Relations between the states of Belarus and Poland in the context of the Polish minority also point to possible directions of research on the Polish minority, such as a comparative study of the situation of Poles in the neighbouring countries - Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine.

INTRODUCTION [1]

The history and the current situation of minorities in Europe continue to be significant research issues, even though various researchers have made efforts to cover them. In the case of the Republic of Belarus, relations between various social groups (including national and ethnic minorities, religious minorities and others) constitute one of the basic aspects of its' existence as an independent state. Stereotype assumptions about relations between individual ethnic communities, state policies and "research rhetoric" usually present Belarus as an extraordinarily tolerant country where every representative of any national minority may freely maintain a separate ethnic identity. The level of social acceptance of other ethnic groups is indeed very high, but can we really speak about a general tolerance towards otherness?

The Polish community in Belarus is an interesting case for investigation for several reasons. First of all, the Poles – the third largest ethnic group after Belarusians and Russians[2], have lived on the territory of Belarus for several centuries and in many regions they are a long-lived and cohesive group with their own institutions. The Poles also have their place in the way Belarusians perceive the world: there are rather firm stereotypes about the Polish minority in Belarus as well as about Poles as a nation[3], which are either traditional, based on many centuries of contacts, or based on recent events or political and social processes of the past 20 years.

POLISH MINORITY AS A RESEARCH OBJECT

The Polish minority is a research object that includes several fundamental issues. One of the main problems is the definition and scientific qualification of the Polish population in Belarus. There are several concepts for this issue, which may be summarized as follows:

1. Poles as a national minority, including the issue of group identification and without denying their belonging to or identification with Polishness;

2. People with undetermined or mixed ethnic or cultural identity who in fact are Roman Catholic Belarusians. This approach is very widespread among Belarusian scholars and has a quite a long-lasting historical tradition in scholarship, in political discourse and in journalism;

3. Poles in Belarus are part of the Polish nation outside Poland (this definition is very similar to the first, while at the same time pointing out minimal ties of that group with Belarus and with Belarusians). This refers to Poles in Belarus as a separate ethnic group, which has more historical and social ties with Belarusians and Lithuanians than with Poland and Poles. This concept relates to the historical multilevel ethnic consciousness on the territories of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania[4], to relations between the Polish population in Lithuania – mostly in the

Vilnius region and Poles in Belarus.[5] This concept is supported by the following: co-existence in one geographic territory, prolonged non-existence of a state border between the historical Vilnius region and western Belarus and part of Latgale[6], being part of the same state – the Russian Empire, the Second Polish Republic and later the Soviet Union, and subsequently forming common characteristics of Poles in those territories.[7]

The approaches mentioned above are all related, because individual elements of these concepts can combine and demonstrate various aspects of the identification problem of the Polish population in Belarus. An important element in defining the Polish population is belonging to Polishness: different levels of belonging to the Polish culture and national traditions, knowledge of the Polish language, Polish self-identification.[8] Apart from the mentioned characteristics, one of the more important attributes of Polishness is the Roman Catholic faith, which, at least in the western part of the country, is seen as the "Polish church" or, in the common language, "Polish faith". It is true however that at present this denomination is expanding its influence on the Belarusian population and it is gradually becoming more "Belarusian", particularly in the eastern part of the country.[9]

An important characteristic which has impact on the preservation of Polish identity is the geographic location of this group.[10] Living in cohesive groups and a proximity of the border with Poland (in the period of the USSR also with Lithuania) help to preserve the community and social institutions (multigenerational families, Polish organisations, church structures). Opportunities for intensive contacts with Poland and access to Polish media also have influence on the level of Polish identification and historical memory.[11]

Another important research issue is the attitude of different political structures or groups, as well as of intellectuals towards the Polish minority in Belarus. The key factor with influence over the functioning of the Polish community is the discourse of official state authorities such as the government, the parliament, regional authorities and various experts or intellectuals who influence views and possible strategies towards Poles and other minorities who over the past 20 years of Belarusian independence, have had different visions of policies towards minorities. Changes in the discourse and actions undertaken by the authorities were dependent not only on internal factors but also on foreign policy, especially towards Poland and, since 2004, also towards the European Union. The visions and the rhetoric of authorities evolved from an actual denial of the group's Polish identification (in particular in the early 1990's among some parliamentarians and representatives of certain regional authorities and intellectuals) to cautious interest and recognition of Poles as one of the national minorities loyal to the current Belarusian authorities. Foreign relations, especially with Poland, are a very important element of the rhetoric of Belarusian power structures, while also being a reason for diplomatic conflicts, as well as social conflict involving the Polish minority. The most prominent examples are the conflict surrounding the Union of Poles in Belarus, ongoing since 2004-2005[12] and the attitude of Belarusian authorities towards the Polish law on the "Polish Charter" awarded to Belarusian citizens of Polish origin. Another research issue is the policy of the Belarusian government towards the Polish minority as a group and its stance on securing rights of individual citizens of Polish origin, as well as legal regulations regarding the observance of minority rights, including especially policies towards the Roman Catholic Church. It should however be noted that in legal terms the Polish minority is treated equally compared to other minorities, as state legislation ensures the protection and promotion of minority cultures and languages, while specific regulations are included in bilateral agreements between Belarus and Poland.[13]

Apart from the discourse of the authorities, an important aspect is the attitude of independent political, social, cultural groups which regard themselves as oppositional to the current political regime (in various degrees). Their stance towards Poles is also based on historical conditions and it has evolved to accepting a separate Polish identity and possible support from Poles in fighting the current authorities. Nevertheless in many cases a large group of activists, in particular those with nationalist inclinations, see the Polish minority as polonised Belarusian Catholics who ought to change their identity from Polish to Belarusian. For the opposition structures the Polish community is interesting mostly due to its western orientation, in particular its contacts

with Poland. This trend is more imagined than real, because it has more of a Central European identity, being less interested in integration with Russia and less nostalgic about the Soviet period.

The Polish minority in Belarus is also a factor for fruitful and diversified cooperation between Belarus and Poland, as is the Belarusian minority in Poland. It is however also a reason for political and ethnic conflicts, especially in the context of geopolitical choices made by Belarusian authorities, that is for example close integration with Russia and other CIS countries, Pan-Slavic and anti-Western rhetoric, support for authoritarian regimes in other countries. It is important to emphasize the role of the media, as they do in fact influence public opinion. This is especially true about the Polish media, which have a strong influence on Polish political elites and public opinion and thus also on the policies towards the Polish minority in Belarus and towards Belarusian authorities. In most cases Belarusian media react to such signals from their Polish colleagues, but as a rule their reaction is visibly delayed and largely dependent on the position of Belarusian authorities. However in some cases, the Belarusian media are sources of important information, influencing public opinion in both countries. It often happens that the media broadcasts strengthen and stir negative stereotypes and ethnic perceptions, mainly rooted in the historical past.

A third research issue would be the historical context of the situation of the Polish community. The identification of its representatives as "Poles in Belarus" (or "Belarusian Poles") is formed in connection with the existence of an independent Belarusian state. For the majority of the Polish population, who are a border area population in the Poland-Belarus and Poland-Lithuania borderlands, belonging to a certain state is one of the key elements of identification.[14] The existence and inclusion in different state structures throughout many centuries has had an impact on various aspects of the lives of Poles in Belarus. An important period was the time when Belarusian and Lithuanian territories were part of the Russian Empire and intense action was taken to form and spread a clear anti-Polish stereotype in the rhetoric and policies of Russian authorities and Russian historiography. This stereotype was substantially strengthened in the Soviet period.[15] Tsarist Russia's repressive policies, which followed the suppression of the 1863 January Uprising, became a model for subsequent political practice, especially in the Stalinist period. In 1919-1939 the Polish community on the present Belarusian territory belonged to two different states, the Second Polish Republic and Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (as part of the Soviet Union), and this quite strongly influenced the different historical experience of those groups.[16] The policy of the newly re-established Polish state explicitly encouraged Polish national identity, while the Soviets at first tried to form new "Soviet Poles", even at an organisational level, by creating a Polish autonomous district. However since the 1930's the policy shifted towards repressions and the resettlement of Poles to other territories.[17] In the period after the Second World War (with the exception of a short period directly after it), Soviet policy was characterised by making any activities directed towards the preservation of ethnic identity by Poles in the Belarusian SSR impossible and forbidden, while official rhetoric stressed the “artificial" character of Polish self-identification within that group and also the group's affiliation to the Belarusian nation, even though Poles were registered as a separate nationality in official statistics.[18] In contrast to Poles in other Soviet republics such as Lithuania or Ukraine, Poles in Belarus did not have their own national institutions (schooling, press, cultural organisations) and they could not openly maintain their language and national traditions. The only Polish institution, working in extremely difficult and repressive conditions, was the Roman Catholic Church (Polishness was in that period practically merged with the Roman Catholic faith), together with strong family relations.

Political and economic changes in the USSR towards the end of the 1980's, together with increased social activity, created conditions for articulating the demands of the Polish population in Belarus and for setting up permanent and well-structured centres that could voice their interests. Currently there are several Polish organizations in the country, the largest of them being the Union of Poles in Belarus, divided in two since 2005, with both factions using the same name. While only one is legally recognized by Belarusian authorities, the other one is recognized by the Polish state authorities. There is also the Polish School Association in Belarus[19], several private schools that teach Polish language, history, culture and traditions, two state schools with Polish as

a medium of instruction (in Hrodna (Polish: *Grodno*) and Vaŭkavysk (Polish: *Wołkowysk*), Polish philology faculties at some universities, Polish libraries, press, including the "Głos znad Niemna" ("The Nioman Voice") weekly in Hrodna, so-called "Polish Houses" in a number of smaller cities (as headquarters of sub--structures of the Union of Poles), the headquarters of the Polish School Association in Hrodna and several other organizations all over Belarus. Despite substantive efforts directed towards the restitution and preservation of the Polish language by Polish organisations, the process is very slow and requires a lot of coordination and a high level of engagement from the Polish community. Under current circumstances, Poles are being strongly Russified and the Polish language is, at best, a second language in the family and in school education.[20] According to official statistics, Poles are the most attached to the Belarusian language of all other ethnic groups in Belarus, including Belarusians themselves. In the most recent census in 2009, a majority of Poles (171,287 people or 58.2%) declared Belarusian to be their mother tongue, while Polish as a mother tongue was declared only by 15,854 people (5.4 %).[21] Language issues are a subject of direct state interventions: statements by some public officials focus on the opinion that the presence of the Polish language in the liturgy of the Catholic Church in its present volume cannot be justified and suggest the introduction of liturgy in the state's "official languages".[22] In fact, the main language of communication in the public sphere, including state institutions, is Russian. The trend aimed at removing the Polish language from the Catholic Church in Belarus is has been visible for several years.[23]

To round out the picture of the Polish minority, it is important to make note of an ongoing migration, not always reflected in statistics, of the young generation to Poland and to other countries. This is a trend characteristic to the majority of the population of Belarus, related to economic and partly also to political problems in the country. The migration process is the most visible among the best-educated youth, who are aware of their Polish identity, knowledgeable and acquainted with contemporary Polish culture. However, despite differences and a certain westernisation of the Polish minority, it is still very strongly integrated into the Belarusian society, mainly through political, language[24], economic and social factors. In many cases the only important characteristic trait is a high level of religiosity and high participation in religious practices. Most contemporary scholars involved in research on the Polish minority also stress language and religion-related issues in that community, while such issues as employment, migration, education level and social mobility are hardly researched. Such research would certainly require in-depth sociological studies on the perception of historical memory, historical policies, other symbols of affiliation to the culture and Polish traditions in the public space of Belarus, as well as Polish-language press and websites and their reception in local communities. A general sociological monograph on the Polish minority would allow for better assessment not only of the identity, but also a broader context of the functioning of the group.[25]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It would be worth undertaking comparative studies of the Polish minority and other minorities in Belarus and their cooperation with relevant organizations.[26] In the regional context the most interesting results could come from a comparative analysis of the Polish minority in Lithuania[27], Latvia[28] and Ukraine[29], as they share similar historical experiences and problems typical for post-soviet countries, and have been exposed to political transformation, despite living in the rather differentiated social conditions of each country. The situation in Lithuania and in Latvia is significantly different from that in Ukraine, although the latter may be a better comparative background in many respects. Nevertheless, considering the historical and geographical context, it is worthwhile to compare the situation of Belarusian Poles with their kin in Lithuania and Latvia, particularly in the border regions.

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[5] In the context of linguistic identity of the borderland population in Belarus-Lithuania, one shall mention research by Prof. Elżbieta Smułkowa, where the current situation is presented in: Smułkowa, Elżbieta. "Charakter współczesnej wielojęzyczności na pograniczu słowiańsko-bałtyckim"in Jolanta Mędelska and Zofia Sawaniewska-Mochowa (eds.), *Językowe i kulturowe dziedzictwo Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego. Księga jubileuszowa na 1000-lecie Litwy* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, Bydgoszcz, 2010), 171-179.

[6] The territory of the Vilnius region (in principle identical with the borders of the former Vilnius province and Vilnius county of the period 1922-1939) is known as the „Polish belt", i.e. a territory very densely populated by Poles at the Balto-Slavic border. As a consequence of historical, political and social events of the second half of the twentieth century, this territory was changed from a cultural centre into a broad border belt, see also: Donskikh, Sergey. "Polski pas kak primer transformacii kul'turnogo centra v pogranich'je" in Eugeniusz Skrobocki (eds.), *Problemy świadomości narodowej ludności polskiej na Białorusi* (Związek Polaków na Białorusi, Grodno, 2005), 45-63.

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[9] Gorbaniuk, Julia, and Gorbaniuk, Oleg. "Postrzegane przyczyny i konsekwencje wprowadzenie języka białoruskiego do liturgii mszy św. w Kościele katolickim na Białorusi" in Eugeniusz Skrobocki (eds.), *Problemy świadomości narodowej ludności polskiej na Białorusi* (Związek Polaków na Białorusi, Grodno, 2005), 7-24.

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